

Communicating sport in cyberspace: An analysis the potential agenda setting effects of internet collegiate sport message boards

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Abstract 214**

Over the past decade, the Internet has rapidly become a viable medium for interpersonal and commercial interaction (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). The ability of Internet users to connect to other users and share similar interests is an area that demands further scholarly investigation in the fields of sport marketing and sport communication. One of the most popular types of interest-sharing locations on the Internet is the sport message board, which allows large numbers of users from across the globe to meet online and discuss sports and other topics. These message board sites continue to increase in popularity, with some sites garnering as many as 20 million page views in a single month (Pegram, 2007). Message board users stay logged into these sites longer than any other Internet-based sports media (Solomon, 2006).

Message boards are utilized for a variety of reasons, including information-gathering, socialization, business, and entertainment (James, Wotring, & Forest, 1995). Of these reasons, James et al. noted that information-gathering and socialization were the two main uses which message board users identified as reasons for participation. This finding was verified through conversations with current message board owners and administrators (Lamb, 2007; Pegram, 2007).

The focus of this study was to explore the current state of message boards, and examine their potential agenda-setting effects. The theory of agenda setting argues that the predominance in the public consciousness of certain issues or items can be influenced by the way the media covers those issues (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By highlighting certain issues and presenting them in a certain manner, the media can increase the salience of these issues in the eyes of the public (Denham, 2004; Lang & Lang, 1983). Despite the arrival of the Internet as a mass medium (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002), there have been relatively few investigations of agenda setting into this medium. Morris and Ogan (1996) suggest that communication researchers have tended to concentrate on the more familiar forms of print and broadcast media, due to the more straightforward application of existing communication theory that these mediums provide. As a result, the body of available research on which to draw from regarding agenda setting on the Internet is relatively small. However, Roberts et al. (2002) note that the continued growth in popularity of the Internet creates a further demand for the investigation of the content available to users online.

This study utilized a content analysis methodology to analyze the two most popular collegiate sport message board networks in the United States (Freeman, 2006). The specific focus was on the the types of discussion forums available to users, the order of forums on the message board site, and the differences between message boards for individual schools. Examination of these message board sites resulted in 248 message boards devoted to NCAA Division I athletic programs, with 1460 distinct discussion forums within these message boards. Of these forums, 989 (67.7%) were devoted to collegiate sports, while the balance were devoted to non-sports topics such as merchandise, religion, and politics. An examination of forums devoted to a specific sport discovered that college football was the most prevalent subject (N=220), with nearly double the number of forums than any other sport, and was most likely to appear first in the rank order of site forums.

The results of this study indicate that potential agenda setting effects exist in the world of Internet collegiate sport message boards. The initial examination of discussion forums as detailed in this survey has illustrated a remarkably extensive set of online communities. The descriptive analysis of these discussion forums indicates a wide array of topic areas available to users. However, certain types of forums (e.g., football, basketball, recruiting) were given far more prominence in the rank order of forums, at the expense of other types of forums (e.g., women's sports, non-revenue sports). The order in which stories and items are listed can have an agenda setting effect on user interaction with those stories or items (Tremayne & Schmitz Weiss, 2005). Furthermore, the total number of discussion forums dedicated to football and basketball was far greater than those dedicated to women's sports and non-revenue sports.